E
175
.1
.S7

BANCROFT
LIBRARY

THE LIBRARY
OF
THE UNIVERSITY
OF CALIFORNIA

DEC 3 1925

NATIONALITY AND HISTORY

BY

H. MORSE STEPHENS, 1857-1919

REPRINTED FROM THE

American Historical Review

VOL. XXI., NO. 2 JANUARY 1916

50612
Bancroft Library

[Reprinted from THE AMERICAN HISTORICAL REVIEW, Vol. XXI., No. 2, Jan., 1916.]

NATIONALITY AND HISTORY[1]

IN the number of the *Contemporary Review* of London for July, 1887 (pp. 107–121), there appeared a short article on "Modern Historians and their Influence on Small Nationalities". After more than twenty-eight years, the writer of that article, greatly honored by election to the presidency of the American Historical Association, takes up the larger and more general topic of "Nationality and History" as the subject of his presidential address at the annual meeting of the Association. Throughout those twenty-eight years his thoughts have dwelt upon the influences which prevent the clear, accurate, and truthful statement of what has happened in the past; as student and teacher of history he has come to realize more and more the futility of pretended impartiality; and at the last he has yielded to the conviction that the first duty of the historical scholar is to grasp the fact that his limitations as a human being must ever debar him, even if the most complete material lies ready to his hand, from attempting more than a personal interpretation of some part or period of the past.

Every generation writes its own history of the past. It is not so much the acquisition or mastery of new material as the changing attitude of each generation that causes the perpetual re-writing of the long story of man living in community with his fellow-men. Each generation looks at the past from a different angle, and the historian is inevitably controlled by the spirit of his age. Every historian is unconsciously biased by his education and surroundings and in his historical works displays not only his interpretation of the past, but also the point of view of the period in which he lives. Honestly, under the inspiration of the truth-lovers of his time, whether they be bold thinkers or ardent men of science, the writer of history tries to discover and tell the truth, the whole truth, and

[1] Presidential address read before the American Historical Association, at Washington, December 28, 1915.

nothing but the truth. But, in his heart of hearts, if he be not a self-deceived fanatic, he knows well that he cannot free himself from his human limitations, and that his work, whether it be in research, in narration, or in interpretation, can only approximate the truth. To understand the writings of any historian, we of to-day know that our first duty is to study his personality and the point of view of his age. We no longer believe in the veracity of Thucydides or Tacitus; we know that the great Athenian colored his facts to make a dramatic story, and that the great Roman satirist and rhetorician was of the race of pamphleteers, more intent to score the failings of the rulers of a past generation and to insinuate their shortcomings than to recognize the way in which the early Roman emperors and their imperial system maintained the peace and order of the Mediterranean world. Since Clio was reckoned among the Muses, the Greeks regarded history as a branch of imaginative literature, demanding artistic presentation, and this idea was not dissipated until the eighteenth century. It was part of the business of an historian to assert his impartiality and to declare that his duty was to discover and tell the truth, but his work as an historian was not judged by his truthfulness and impartiality but by his literary skill. All students of history know Lucian's inimitable "The Way to write History", and how the witty Syrian declares that "the historian's one task is to tell the thing as it happened",[2] but they also recollect that his whole essay is concerned rather with the way in which the story is to be told than with the method by which truth and impartiality are to be attained. The example of the classical writers of Greece and Rome was supreme until the eighteenth century, and the protestations of truth-seeking and truth-telling were invariably followed by histories that exhibited either the personal views of the writer with regard to the past, or at the very least the influence of the age in which he lived.

It is curious to-day to read these protestations of impartiality and truth-seeking, which form the opening passages or prefaces of nearly all histories written in ancient, medieval, and modern times. They are perfectly honest protestations, for most historians intended to tell the truth and were convinced that they had discovered and interpreted it. But "Methinks they do protest too much", and the very fact that they felt it necessary to protest at all reveals that at the back of their hearts lingered a doubt as to whether they would be implicitly believed, just as the skilled liar or romancer feels it necessary to preface his best stories with the remark: "I am going to tell

[2] *The Works of Lucian of Samosata* (translated by H. W. Fowler and E. G. Fowler, Oxford, 1905), II. 128.

the exact truth." Unswerving faith in Christianity formed the basis of the knowledge and the narratives of the medieval writers; even the scepticism of the Renaissance accepted the assumptions of the ancient historians of Greece and Rome; and the historical controversialists of the period of the Protestant Reformation were firmly convinced that their religious views were correct and interpreted the past in the light of their particular beliefs. We smile to-day at the legends in which our predecessors so firmly believed, and each generation sets up a new conception of the characteristics of the past, which it thinks justifies its smiles. The great historians of the eighteenth century, Gibbon, for instance, and Voltaire, were quite as certain that they understood the past correctly as Orosius and Bossuet, and regarded themselves as leading the world to the truth on the basis of pure rationalism as their predecessors on the basis of accepted Christianity.

Just as the believers and sceptics in revealed religion thought that they possessed the key to the right understanding of the past and sought the justification of their beliefs and unbeliefs in their interpretation of past happenings, so all political historians honestly believed in the all-importance of politics and expounded their own political theories and convictions in their narratives of events. "History is past politics", cried Professor Freeman of Oxford, "and politics is present history", and Professor Thomas Arnold, also of Oxford, declared that "the historian must be a good party man", showing the naïve idea that politics, and even a particular brand of politics, has been the only real force in the building of civilization. In this they had good warrant from the ancient classical historians whose works they knew so well and whose example had so deeply impressed them. The recurrence to a perverted and inaccurate view of the past as a source for political arguments in the present was no more extraordinary than the previous appeal to a perverted and inaccurate view of the past as a justification for any variety of religious faith or ecclesiastical organization.

This brings me to the actual subject of this address. The belief in nationality has been in the nineteenth century as fundamental a doctrine as the belief in Christianity or in monarchy or democracy or aristocracy in previous ages. Just as a fervent belief in Christianity, based upon history and dogmatic theology, led to a belief in the righteousness of slaying Mohammedans in the period of the Crusades; just as a fervent belief in Catholicism or Lutheranism or Calvinism, based upon history and dogmatic theology, was held to justify religious persecution and the religious wars of the sixteenth

and seventeenth centuries in Europe; just as a fervent belief in different political theories led, in part at least, to the civil wars in England in the seventeenth century and in the United States of America in the nineteenth century; so a fervent belief in the doctrine of nationality has led to enmity between nations in the nineteenth century. Historians had their share in creating and justifying the fervor of religious and political beliefs in the past; they have had their share also in creating and maintaining the national fanaticism of the present. Being men and not machines, they have felt the spirit of their times and expressed it. When Pope Urban II. preached the Crusade against Islam at Clermont, he spoke in all honesty and roused Latin Christendom with his eloquence, though the fundamental intolerance of Christian and Mohammedan against each other had long been felt; and the nationalist historians of the nineteenth century, though merely voicing the feelings of their contemporaries, must bear their share of the responsibility of setting the nations of the world against each other.

This is not the place to examine the history of the doctrine of nationality in minute detail. Nationality has been regarded as the legitimate and natural outcome of family, tribal, and racial organization; it has also been declared to be the result of neighborhood feeling. To some theorists, the chief bond of nationality appears to be that of a common language, which is obviously contradicted by the intense patriotism of the Swiss nation; to others the bond of race unity seems most attractive, in spite of the denial by the ethnologists that there is any such thing as a pure race; while to others again the most effective definition seems to be that of a common historic tradition, which binds together into one historic community people of different races and different languages. What is certain is that there is a radical contrast between historians like Gibbon, who looked upon the Roman Empire of the second century A. D., with its unity of administration in spite of the diversity of population, as the ideal of civilization, and writers like Stewart Chamberlain, who regard nationality in general, and one nationality in particular, as the greatest possible force making for human progress. In the later Middle Ages, the word "nation" seems to have been more especially used in the matter of university organization than as marking political or racial differences. Martin Luther, it is true, made his "Address to the Christian Nobility of the German Nation" in 1520, but even in his time the ruling idea was rather the unity of Western European civilization than its diversity among different nations. While the consciousness of national patriotism emerges especially in Spain,

France, and England in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, the tendency of the eighteenth century was in the opposite direction. States were regarded as the political units rather than nations, and the changing of the control of Italy and the Catholic Netherlands, and, above all, the partitions of Poland marked the indifference generally felt towards the idea of nationality. Civilization was held to be European, not national; literature and science were cultivated in common by the scholars of different states; universal histories were in more favor than national histories; and Goethe could declare aloud that "above the nations was humanity".

All this changed with the French Revolution. Feeling itself at issue with the states of Europe, revolutionary France appealed to the pride of national patriotism. The first years of the Revolution and the Constitution of 1791 had abolished the old French provinces with their varying history, their different laws, their local institutions, and their provincial customs, and with the establishment on September 21, 1792, of the French Republic, "one and indivisible", a new national France was born. National fanaticism brought nearly all Frenchmen fit for war under arms, and the triumph of republican France over all her foes justified the principle of nationality in the eyes of Frenchmen. But not satisfied with the success of the national defense, republican France became aggressive. Having successfully defended herself, she now began to interfere with the national rights of others. Under the leadership of an Italian general, a professional army was developed from the army of national defense and the meteoric career of General and then First Consul Bonaparte culminated in his coronation as the Emperor Napoleon on December 2, 1804. Napoleon was a typical eighteenth-century thinker; he was an Italian with the cosmopolitan views of the Italians, who were accustomed to regard themselves as Florentines, or Venetians, or Neapolitans, and who had made no particular objections to being governed in their different states by Spanish or Hapsburg princes; he regarded Europe as a unit, which should not be divided into warring and hostile states, but benevolently administered according to the ideals of the enlightened despots; and since he was himself a man without a country, he had no sympathy with the ideas of nationality. The Napoleonic army was his army, and not a national French army; the Napoleonic empire was a European empire, and, as Professor Driault has pointed out, he had it in mind, if he had been successful in his Russian campaign, to move the capital of his dominions to Rome and there renew the glories of the ancient Roman Empire.

Bancroft

The cosmopolitan ideas of the statesmen and historians of the eighteenth century had their effect upon the political theories of Napoleon. Gibbon and the writers of universal history had dwelt upon the services rendered to European humanity by the unity of the Roman Empire and the extension of the Pax Romana, and had regarded its break-up as the beginning of barbarism. Consciously carrying out the spirit of his century Napoleon deliberately hoped and planned in his empire to restore the glorious peace of the days of Trajan and Hadrian and the Antonines.

Against these grandiose ideas, the Europe of the political sovereign states could not successfully contend. The Hapsburgs and the Hohenzollerns alike went down before the Napoleonic army. The princes of central Europe bowed the knee to the conqueror, who redistributed their states and made new kings and new states in the old high-handed imperial fashion of ancient Rome. Napoleon carried all before him until he came into conflict with the national idea, which had saved republican France and which he never understood. First in Britain arose a burst of national patriotism under the threat of invasion from the camp at Boulogne; the navy became the national service; Nelson became the national hero; national volunteers were raised and drilled for national defense; Tom Dibdin wrote his sea-songs; and Wordsworth in a series of splendid sonnets expressed the fullness of the national idea. From the divided country of the War of American Independence, from the unwilling opponent of republican France, governed by Pitt's coercion acts, with an army recruited from the jails and the poorhouses and a mutinous navy manned by the press-gang, arose a united and patriotic nation. Then came the insurrection of the Spaniards and the Portuguese against the interference of Napoleon and the assertion of their national spirit against foreign invasion. Some Frenchmen, notably Talleyrand, understood the writing on the wall, but not Napoleon. Secure in his belief in European imperialism, he refused to modify his ideas. The bitter opposition of the Tyrolese under Andreas Hofer in 1809 might have taught him that even central Europe would not submit permanently to Napoleonic control; the Duke of Brunswick and the gallant Schill might have warned him that even the Germans might resist; but convinced of the validity of his theory of empire and the grandeur of his aims he persisted in his policy. The invasion of Russia in 1812 was the beginning of the end; though hardly a century had elapsed since Peter the Great turned Muscovy into Russia and spread the boundary of Europe to the Ural Mountains, a Russian national spirit

showed itself and the Napoleonic Grand Army vanished in the snow and frost. The following year witnessed the uprising of Germany. Inspired by Prussian valor and organization, by the propaganda of such German enthusiasts as Vater Jahn, by such poems as Arndt's "The German Fatherland" and Körner's "Song of the Sword", a German national patriotism revealed itself, and a German nation did what Hapsburg and Hohenzollern had failed to do and ended Napoleonic imperialism. France refused to rise in her national might to support the adventurer, who had used her national armies to found his European empire, and the Napoleonic Empire came to an end. Nationalism had triumphantly asserted itself and the idea and the doctrine of nationality had been born.

When the diplomatists of Europe re-made the map of Europe under the guidance of Metternich in the Congress of Vienna, they showed themselves absolutely opposed to the doctrine of nationality. They united the Protestant and the Catholic Netherlands despite the difference of the prevailing religions and the historic separation of the two states; they sanctioned the union of Sweden and Norway; they refused to restore Poland, where Napoleon had, and there alone, aroused hopes of the recognition of national independence; they re-divided Italy into states ruled by foreign princes and gave to the Hapsburgs both Lombardy and Venetia; and they paid no attention to the demand for a united Germany. The inevitable result was to be seen in the insurrections in Belgium and Poland in 1830 and in the various national demonstrations in Italy and Germany, which preceded and succeeded them. Far more important was the Revolution of July, 1830, in France, which in its overthrow of Charles X. opened the way to the free expression of political thought in the country which was still intellectual leader of western Europe.

The rise of the principle of nationality during the Napoleonic period had been mainly marked by the poets, of whom Wordsworth in England and Arndt in Germany were the most typical, for the years of actual conflict were not favorable to historical study, or, indeed, to studies of any kind. But when peace had been restored, the nationalist point of view, which was to control the minds of men throughout the nineteenth century, began to influence both historical research and historical writing. As early as 1816 the great German statesman, Stein, who had been the chief German exponent of the German national idea in the German resistance to the Napoleonic Empire, had conceived the idea of quickening the taste for German history; in 1819 the Society for the Study of Early German History was founded; in 1824 the definite plan for the

publication of the *Monumenta Germaniae Historica* was promulgated; and in 1826 the first volume of the series appeared.[3] But it was not until after the Revolution of 1830 that important national histories began to be written. In them the influence of the Romantic Movement and more particularly of Sir Walter Scott's historical novels can be seen in picturesqueness of literary style and the attention paid to dramatic episodes and individual personalities, but through them all runs the desire to bring out the persistence of the national element. Nowhere can this be more clearly seen than in Henri Martin's *Histoire de France,* of which the first edition appeared in 1838–1853. The aim of Martin is to show that the French nation has always preserved its identity in spite of its adoption of the Latin language under the Roman Empire to the almost complete extinction of its original Celtic tongue and in spite of the conquest by the Franks, which gave the land its modern name. Through such radical changes, Martin declares that a national character, illustrated in the *esprit gaulois,* persisted and that the settlement within its borders of German Franks and Scandinavian Northmen had not affected the national identity of the people of France. The key to French national history is, according to Martin, to be found in the continuance of Celtic ideas and Celtic characteristics. Augustin Thierry had gone a step further and in his *Histoire de la Conquête de l'Angleterre par les Normands,* published in 1825, had rejoiced in the victory of France over England at Hastings as if it had been a battle between the nations that had fought at Waterloo. Jules Michelet, in his *Histoire de France,* published in 1836–1843, was almost dithyrambic in his portraiture of the French nation, which had become to him a personal hero. Nor should the name of Guizot be forgotten, for his services to the national history of France included not only his *Histoire de la Civilisation en France,* published in 1828–1830, but also his foundation of the Société de l'Histoire de France in 1832 and his commencement of the publication by the French government in 1833 of the *Documents inédits sur l'Histoire de France.*

But, after all, the nationalistic tendency of French historians under the monarchy of July did not have a great political effect nor tend to change the condition of Europe. France had shown her glowing national spirit in the days of the Reign of Terror, and her nationalistic historians only worked to emphasize with some exaggeration the antiquity of the existence of such a spirit. It was otherwise in Germany and Italy. There the problem of the nationalist historians was to show that in spite of ancient political

[3] Gooch, *History and Historians in the Nineteenth Century* (1913), p. 65.

divisions there had always been a German nation and an Italian nation. This is not an address on historiography or a summary of the growth of the effect of the national spirit in creating the modern German Empire or the modern Italian Kingdom. Bismarck is reported to have said that next to the Prussian army, it was the German professors of history who had done the most to create the new Germany under the hegemony of Prussia. The views set forth by the long list of eminent German historians from Dahlmann through Droysen and Sybel to Treitschke dwelt upon the historic unity of the German people and argued for the creation of the united German state, which had been foreshadowed in the united German movement against the Napoleonic Empire. Before 1848 the tendency of some German historians, especially in the south and west, was to promote a Germany which should have its main political centre between the Rhine and the Elbe and it is not without significance that the German Parliament of 1848, which was largely called together through the influence of professors, should have met at Frankfort; but the failure of the revolutionary movement of 1848 opened the way for union under the leadership of Prussia. The passionate nationalism of the new Germany was shown in its annexation of Schleswig-Holstein and Alsace-Lorraine, which were both claimed by the new Germany upon historic as well as upon linguistic and racial grounds, and is seen in the demands made for the inclusion in the German Empire of all territory in which the German language is spoken and that was once a part of the old Holy Roman Empire.

In Italy the movement of the Risorgimento was reflected in historical works as well as in poetry and romance, and in no work more typically than in Botta's *Storia dell' Italia,* intended as a continuation of Guicciardini and published in 1834.

In states that had long possessed national unity, there could not be any political result of the doctrine of nationality. There could only be, as in France, a deepening of the sense of national patriotism and a conviction that national unity should be an article of political faith, which implied the antagonism of every nation to every other nation. England waited long for its national historian. Although many English historians were fanatically nationalistic and supremely insular in their conviction of the superiority of their own over every other nation, it was not until 1874, when J. R. Green published his *Short History of the English People,* that a modern nationalist historian, with intent to insist, like Michelet, upon the personality of the nation, and to exaggerate, like Martin, the antiquity of national

unity, actually appeared. The immediate success of Green's book was not only the result of its extraordinary literary merit, but also of its expression of a national feeling, which had been steadily growing in intensity. Don Modesto Lafuente in his *Historia de España,* published between 1850 and 1867, has attempted a task for Spain resembling that undertaken for France by Henri Martin, but with hardly the same success. It would be ungracious in this presence to deal at any length with American nationalist historians, further than to point out that two former presidents of this Association, James Schouler, whose *History of the United States under the Constitution* was mostly published between 1880 and 1889, and John Bach McMaster, whose *History of the People of the United States* appeared from 1883 to 1914, show themselves to be inspired with the highest national and patriotic enthusiasm. It is curious to note that such nationalist histories as those of Green and Schouler and McMaster did not see the light until after the doctrine of nationalism had found its fullest expression in Europe in the foundation of the German Empire and the Kingdom of Italy.

But the most interesting phenomenon in the rise of the doctrine of nationality in the nineteenth century has been the revival of small nationalities. It is easy to understand how such great nations as France, England, and Spain caught the new spirit; it is easy to understand how the new national units like Italy and Germany were urged towards consolidation by historic national feeling; but it is not so easy to explain how small nationalities, that had been submerged, sometimes for centuries, and that had been trampled upon by their larger neighbors, responded to the new movement. Here the modern historian triumphed. He recalled to the smaller and submerged peoples the traditions of their former sovereign independence and stimulated their sense of nationality in the present by dwelling upon their glorious past.

This was the side of the question that was dealt with by your president in the article he published in 1887 upon "Great Historians and their Influence upon Small Nationalities". He had been invited to write the article upon Portugal in the ninth edition of the *Encyclopaedia Britannica,* and on that account had been led to the study of the Portuguese historical writers. He found one Portuguese historian towering above the others, the recognized founder of the modern historical school of Portugal. He perceived that it was the revival of interest in the glorious past of Portugal, as shown in the writings of her poets and historians of the nineteenth century, that had killed the Iberianist idea of the political union of Spain and

Portugal, and this led him to inquire if the same was true of other small nationalities of Europe, which had been united and famous in the past. The truth was evident, and the article of 1887 was the result. After sketching the work of Alexandre Herculano de Carvalho e Araujo, whose *Historia de Portugal* was published in 1845–1850 and who started the series of national documents known as the *Portugalliae Monumenta Historica,* the writer dealt with Franz Palacký, whose *Geschichte Böhmens* appeared between 1836 and 1854, and who reminded the Czech population of Bohemia of the glorious days of Huss and Ziska. The result of Palacký's work was to stimulate the consciousness of Bohemian nationality, which had revived again in the nineteenth century after more than one hundred and fifty years of severe repression at the hands of the Hapsburg government. It would take too long here to cover again the ground occupied by the article of 1887. It is enough to state that the establishment of Rumania as a sovereign state was preceded by the revival of the study of Rumanian history, culminating in the great work of Alexandru Xenopol, *L'Histoire des Roumains de la Dacie Trajane.* In Finland and in Poland and in Croatia, in Sweden and in Denmark, and above all in Belgium, profound and passionate historical studies were published and the creation of a national spirit was even more pronounced, if that were possible, in these small states, that especially cherished the memory of their past, than in larger countries, which had a powerful present as well as a splendid past.

This brief account of nationalist historians of the nineteenth century and of their work in promoting the idea and consciousness of nationality leads back to the opening note of this address. Since the spirit of nationality was in the air they yielded to it. To them the fundamental righteousness of the national idea was as clear as the truth of the Christian religion was to the chroniclers of the Middle Ages. They did not argue about it, for it needed no arguments; they felt and expressed their feelings. From them and from their writings, which supported the instinctive cry of national poets and the careful policy of nationalist statesmen by appeals to the past, comes the conviction that nations are the only bases of progress in civilization, and that every nation owes it to the world to extend, by force if necessary, its particular brand of civilization to alien and therefore inferior peoples. National patriotism became the national creed. It filtered through the entire educational system of modern states. However excellent patriotism may be in itself, it has had some startling effects when based upon nationalist histories. The

idea of a common Christianity binding all Christian peoples together in one religion has disappeared; the belief in the brotherhood of man has had no chance. Americans are taught from childhood to hate Britishers by the study of American history, and not only the descendants of the men who made the Revolution, but every newly arrived immigrant child imbibes the hatred of the Great Britain of to-day from the patriotic ceremonies of the public schools. Germans were taught to hate Frenchmen by the study of German history, and the reply made by Ranke to Thiers in 1871, when the French historian visited Berlin after the overthrow of Napoleon III., and asked why the Germans were bent upon continuing the war with France, was the simple truth that "The Germans were fighting against Louis XIV." Hymns of hate are the inevitable outcome of national patriotism based upon national histories. Family blood-feuds, the vendettas of the Corsicans and the Kentucky mountaineers, are considered proofs of a backward civilization, but national hatreds are encouraged as manifestations of national patriotism.

Nationalist historians must bear their share of blame for this, but, as was said at the beginning of this address, every generation writes its own history of the past. The historian is influenced by the prevailing spirit of his age, and he feeds the spirit of national intolerance to-day as his predecessors fed the flames of religious intolerance in days gone by. Woe unto us! professional historians, professional historical students, professional teachers of history, if we cannot see, written in blood, in the dying civilization of Europe, the dreadful result of exaggerated nationalism as set forth in the patriotic histories of some of the most eloquent historians of the nineteenth century. May we not hope that this will be but a passing phase of historical writing, since its awful sequel is so plainly exhibited before us, and may we not expect that the historians of the twentieth century may seek rather to explain the nations of the world to each other in their various contributions to the progress of civilization and to bear ever in mind the magnificent sentiment of Goethe: "Above the nations is humanity".

H. Morse Stephens.